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Rick Baker — Maker of Monsters, Master of the Apes 4

When ten-year-old Rick Baker first began experimenting with the most basic of makeup materials, his emerging passion for the sorts of illusions which could be wrought with these arcane substances was decidedly out of the ordinary. Motion picture makeup—the kind that transforms actors into monsters, aliens or even animals—was not at all the stellar occupation it has come to be; and at the time, there was little in the way of instructional materials an enthusiastic novice could draw upon, let alone a clearly marked path toward professional involvement. Baker's unwavering dedication, coupled with a single-minded pursuit of excellence, was to serve him well, however — vaulting him past such obstacles to a position of prominence in a burgeoning career field in which he now has few peers. From the early, low-budget efforts of *Octoman* and *Schlock*, through *It's Alive* and *The Incredible Melting Man*, and eventually on to loftier assignments in *Star Wars*, *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* and the lamentable *King Kong* remake, Baker honed his skills and developed his talents — ultimately reaching full maturity in response to the diverse challenges of *An American Werewolf in London*, *Videodrome* and *Greystoke*. From simple pie dough makeups to the most complicated of bodily transformations, Baker delves into his life and work, offering an incisive look at the artist and his art. Article by Jordan Fox.

FRONT COVER — Tarzan's ape-mother, Kala, lies mortally wounded in *Greystoke*. A lycanthropic transformation from *An American Werewolf in London* — BACK COVER.

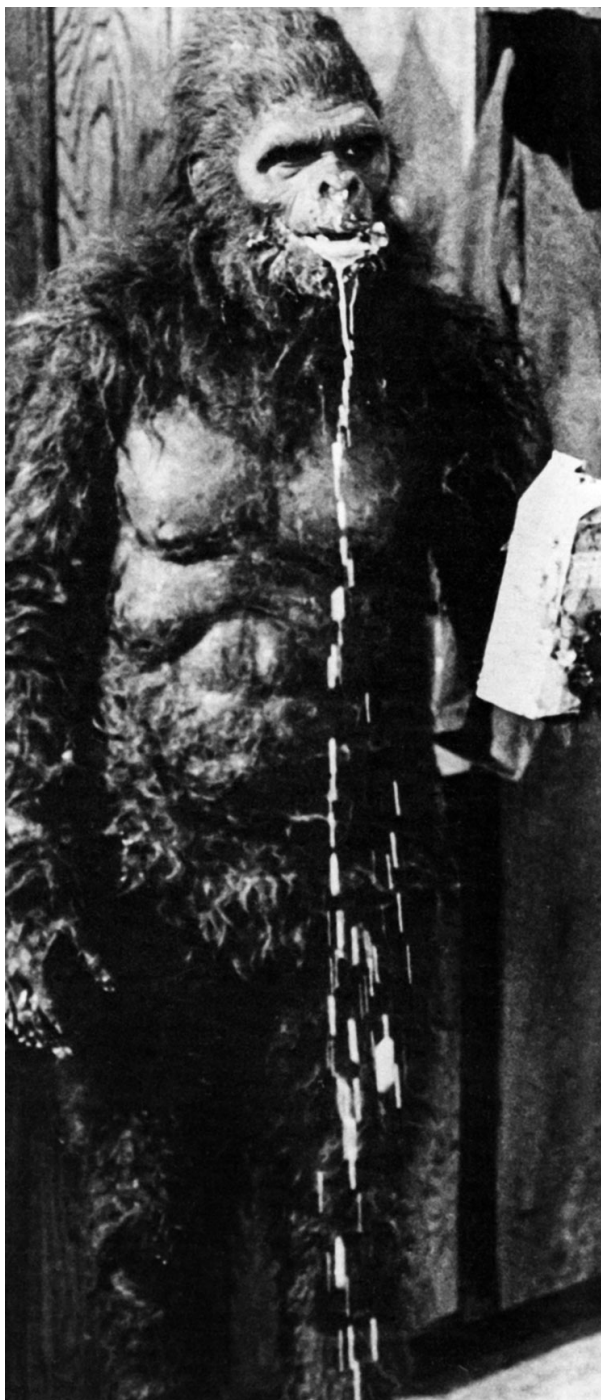


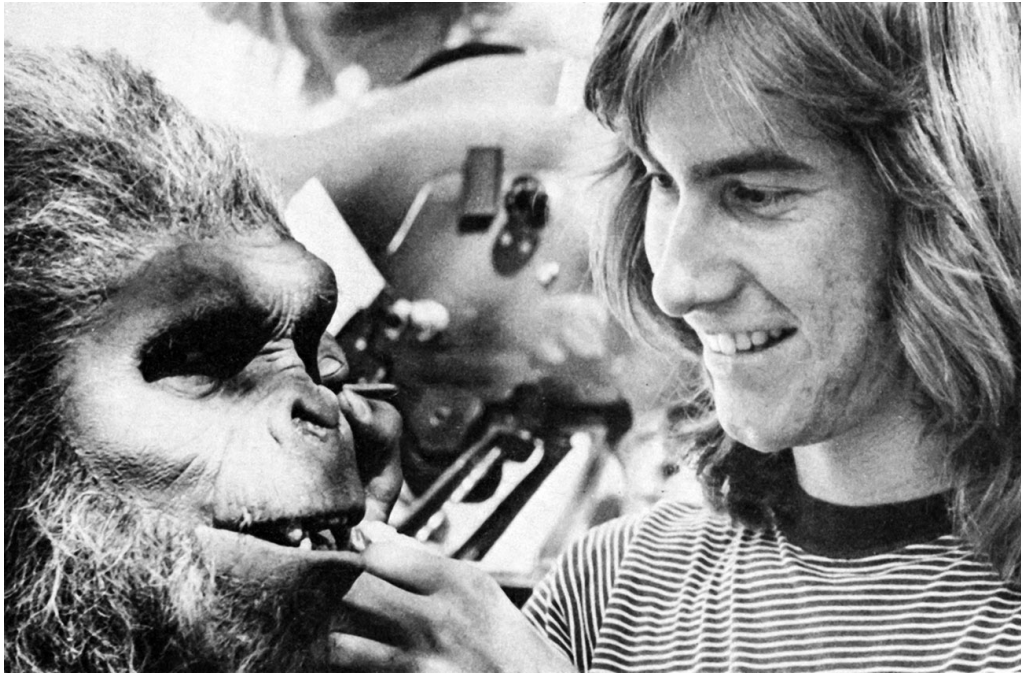
**RICK
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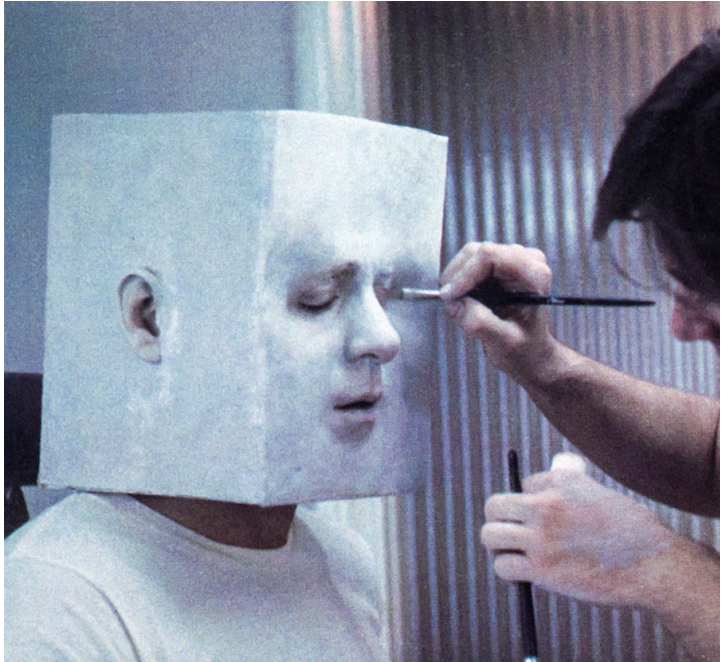
RTV mix, giving it a buttery consistency and allowing it to be spread on with a spatula. The RTV does for the plaster lifemask what the alginate did on the subject's face. Once the RTV mold has cured, it is in even greater need of reinforcement.

This reinforcement is accomplished through a jacket-mold (also called a 'mother'-mold) made of coats of plaster built up over the outside of the RTV mold. To better hold the flexible rubber firmly in place, it is 'keyed' into its jacket as the plaster sets, using 'keys' or projecting rubber tabs (usually three or four) formed on the outside of the RTV mold. Plaster is then poured into the now-reinforced RTV negative to create the corrected lifemask. Its thickness is determined by the amount of plaster poured—sometimes full-solid, but usually to an overall thickness of one inch, leaving it partly hollow, but with a hand-grip cast across the hollow center.

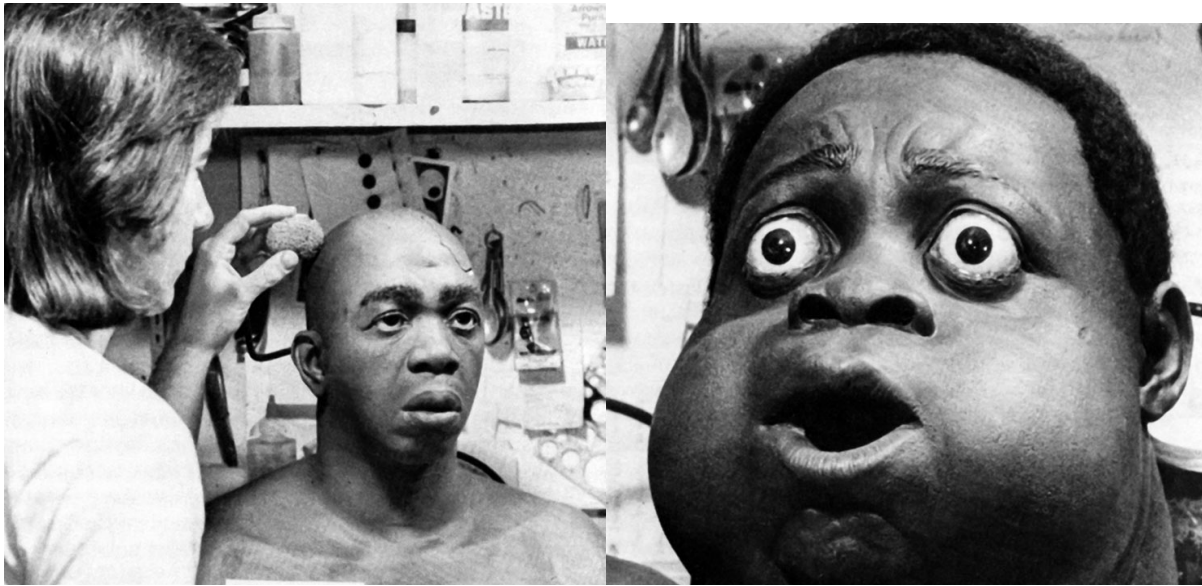
Once hardened, the new lifemask is removed to form the base, or foundation, over which the clay sculpture of the mask or facial appliance will be fashioned. Then, when the time comes to make a plaster negative of the sculpture, this mold will lift straight off instead of 'locking up' with its positive counterpart—the persistent problem Baker had encountered in his early moldmaking. Generally, undercut areas modeled out on the corrected lifemask will have no significant effect on the custom fit of the final mask; or, in the case of a facial piece where the fit is extra-critical, fine adjustments in its application will compensate. Together with its jacket, the flexible mold comprises a *master mold* of that lifemask, and replacements can be cast up in it if this becomes necessary. The lifemask, with its handle, also becomes the positive half of the casting mold in which the foam latex face or piece will be made.

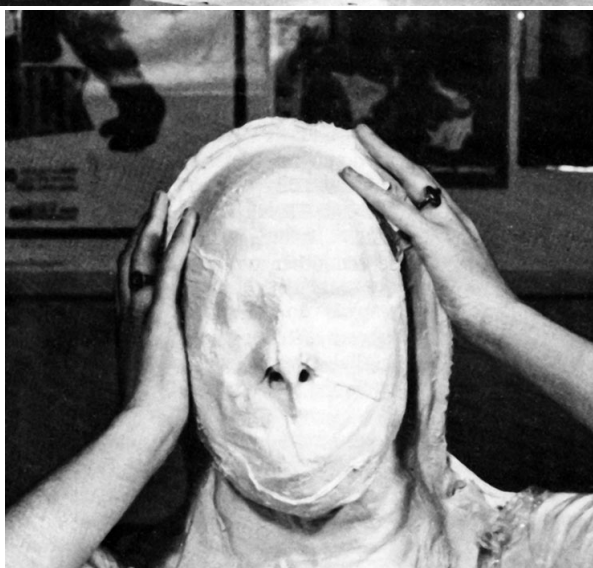
Many kinds of plaster have different uses in the makeup lab. For molds employed in foam-latex work, Baker uses Ultracal-30, a very dense plaster that is quite hard throughout. Less prone to plaster's normal tendency to expand, Baker feels that Ultracal-30 is the most 'accurate' casting material available.

Since water-based clay tends to dry out and crack, Baker uses oil-based clay for his sculpture work. Warming this harder clay in an oven makes it as pliable as water-base. Before any sculpting, the lifemask is coated with a dental separator, which forms a cellophane-like barrier on its surface. The separator keeps oil from the clay from seeping into the plaster and also allows just one part—a nose, for instance—to be easily removed from the sculpture for separate casting. A copy of the lifemask nose can be made quite readily in that section of the master mold, the clay-sculpted nose fitted back onto this plaster piece—which also serves as the positive half of the foam-casting mold—and a foam-casting negative mold made from the sculpture section. The resulting two-piece mold will turn out a false nose appliance identical to the nose on the parent











ice. Even with the Schlock molds scale to fit, the oven door would not fully c

Baker was not yet 'acting' in his crea have one quick cameo in the film as a l crutches who is knocked aside as the mo of a high school dance. Instead, produce Landis play Schlock. Having a *literal* r ture placed an extra strain on Baker. Li made up *and* ready for "Action!" by six ing, even if Schlock didn't have a scen The makeup man and his director/star li locations during production, rising by ' order to begin the three-hour makeup a Unluckily, the first day of filming coin a record heat wave. As the thermometer in an area not noted for shade, they lea to put Schlock's body on until the last noon," Baker recalled, "the water was, hair was drenched." Half of the hair fel conditions imposed a very hard test o durability as well. Staying up most of the got just two hours' sleep in twenty-fo

Schlock surprised many with the quali makeup—especially in view of the sh drawing a compliment from *Planet of t* John Chambers, who played a National the film. Baker credits a lot of the char John Landis. "He worked the face well. much rubber on your face, you can't do pressions and have it pay off. I'd had t ing different makeups in front of a mirr to get expression from them, but Joh quickly—and he was great."

'Blood-and-guts' is the generic term I type of film and special makeups so c careers of virtually everyone in the mak ly because they comprise such a he available work. Ranging from bullet-hit: imaginable, such assignments can be diffl makeup artist wants to work. "It can b makeup person to do it," Baker remarke way to get a strong audience reaction

His next two jobs—*Bone* (lensed as *T* (syndicated to television as *Piranha*, *Pir*. The latter broke from routine, however, in a South American jungle. "You just on people," Baker commented. "I'd rea eyebrow pencil or a pan-stick, and they'd right out into a mess of liquid and wax

Though his passionate hobby was well on its way to becoming a career, Baker was still not above employing his skills just for fun. Included among these nonremunerative efforts were a number of makeup designs devised for himself and wife Elaine — some of which were incorporated into lavish Halloween productions staged by longtime friend Bob Burns. / Once such creation incorporated the Schlock body suit, the It's Alive baby-monster hands and a bat demon mask Baker had constructed for an unmade film. The mask was later to find its way into the Star Wars cantina sequence. / The bat demon creature as seen in Burns' show. / Another show featured Elaine Baker in makeup for an elaborate reenactment of the demonic possession sequence from The Exorcist. / Baker — sculpting a neck appliance for Cicely Tyson — won an Emmy for his work on The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Working with fellow makeup artist Stan Winston, Baker devised and fabricated

makeup. "A well-stocked case is a heavy case," Baker commented. "Lugging it around can get to be a drag, but the idea is to be prepared for any emergency. My case always contained aspirin!"

A Dick Smith recommendation brought Rick Baker the special makeup effects chores on the eighth James Bond film, *Live and Let Die*. Though he was not responsible for the makeup which allowed Mr. Big (Yaphet Kotto) to pose as a white man, he did prepare an inflated special effects head of Kotto for the bizarre finale, and one of the Baron Samedi character (Geoffrey Holder), mechanized so that its eyes would roll back after the impact of a bullet hit on one of the temples.

An invaluable opportunity presented itself in 1973, when Dick Smith asked Baker to assist him for five months on *The Exorcist*. Smith regards this film as a turning point on the way towards productions whose varied and extensive makeup requirements were coming to be more than any one artist could hope to supply on his own. Baker initially helped out with the head-turning Linda Blair dummy, then took over the lab work, freeing Smith to cope with the film's many ongoing design changes while still remaining on schedule. "Having him there in the lab was a joy," said Smith. "He learned things so fast — you only had to show him once what was needed, or even just describe to him how it should be done, and he picked it up right away."

But it would be far more accurate to describe this period as 'postgraduate work' than any sort of apprenticeship, as Baker was already rather accomplished with molds and foam latex techniques. "I can't claim any credit for Rick being such a terrific makeup artist," Smith insists. "It's entirely *his* doing." Nevertheless, Baker greatly benefited from Smith's highly refined lab procedures, and being able to assist in the application of the complex aging makeup on Max Von Sydow — a combination of prosthetics, old-age stipple, special material used to grey his hair, plus formulations for aging his hands, and careful coloration in the finishing.

While Baker was still in New York assisting Smith on *The Exorcist*, he was approached again by Larry Cohen with regard to creating the mutant baby-monster for *It's Alive*. Since Cohen's plan was to show this horrible result of 'chemical pollution' in only a few near-subliminal cuts, Baker suggested a foam rubber dummy with a simple wire armature inside, which could be repositioned for different shots. He had to manufacture it quickly upon returning to California, where production was already underway.

Cohen was so taken with this first creation that he decided to show the baby-monster a bit more — but in motion. So Baker went back to the lab to make a matching flexible mask and a set of claw-hands. The most efficient and effective solution was to position the wearer — an adult — against a neutral













the script. Now, the mutant baby was called upon to do things like crawl across floors or through bushes, and climb a tall ladder while explosive squibs went off nearby. This necessitated the addition of a partial torso, and a tiring sixteen-hour shoot for the intrepid wearer—who could not see at all through the mask's false eyes. Outsize props were used to disguise the true size.

The volunteer the mask and appliances were originally made to fit—before the script changes—was Baker's high school sweetheart, Elaine Parkyn, who had served as makeup test subject over the years and had begun assisting Baker on *Schlock*. With a 'show-must-go-on' dedication paralleling Baker's own—and perhaps not appreciating what the director had in store—she decided to continue on as the title character. Less than a year later, she became Elaine Baker.

Most of Baker's makeups for his Larry Cohen films were shot in and around Cohen's spacious Coldwater Canyon home. A quintessential example of 'economy filmmaking,' *It's Alive* featured a basement room of the house redressed as a schoolroom set, and the exterior grounds for other locations. Baker did a torn-throat makeup on one extra—a doctor whose body is discovered at the beginning of the film. Then, loathe to waste either the makeup or the extra, Cohen had the man don street clothes to become a civilian bystander whose similarly-mutilated body is discovered in the bushes. Fortunately, the baby-monster—aided by the clever way it was shot and edited—was a startling effect, distracting viewers from the preposterous storyline.

For the highly regarded telefilm, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Baker was called in to pool his talents with those of makeup artist Stan Winston on the old-age makeup for Cicely Tyson, who starred as a 110-year-old woman recounting her life back to the Civil War period. Research had shown that blacks did not develop the coarse deep wrinkles of very old Caucasians, and continued looking significantly younger than whites of a comparably advanced age. But this was not considered sufficiently dramatic, so the later makeup stages were exaggerated. While less than satisfied with the compromises of collaboration, Baker shared an Emmy with Winston for the production's makeup, becoming the youngest technical person to win such an award.

Baker thought that the attendant recognition from *Jane Pittman*—which was filmed in a right-to-work state where laws specifically prohibit unions from shutting out nonunion labor—would surely gain him entrance to the makeup union and an influx of desirable job offers. Wrong on both counts, he did not work again in the industry for a year. Never very adept at self-promotion or playing the Hollywood game, Baker had never gone out in search of work. Work had always come to him. The drought was finally broken by a disfigurement mask he made

Thinking the budget remained a factor for creating the suit, Rick Baker collaborated with Rick B. Rambaldi in fabricating the character. I derived the sculptures and cable-actuated designs from the technology of the old. Although the technology was beneficial, I collaborated with Rick B. Baker at the preproduction of the Kong series and David (Kong) test series perspective verisimilitude considerations.



CINEFEX 1







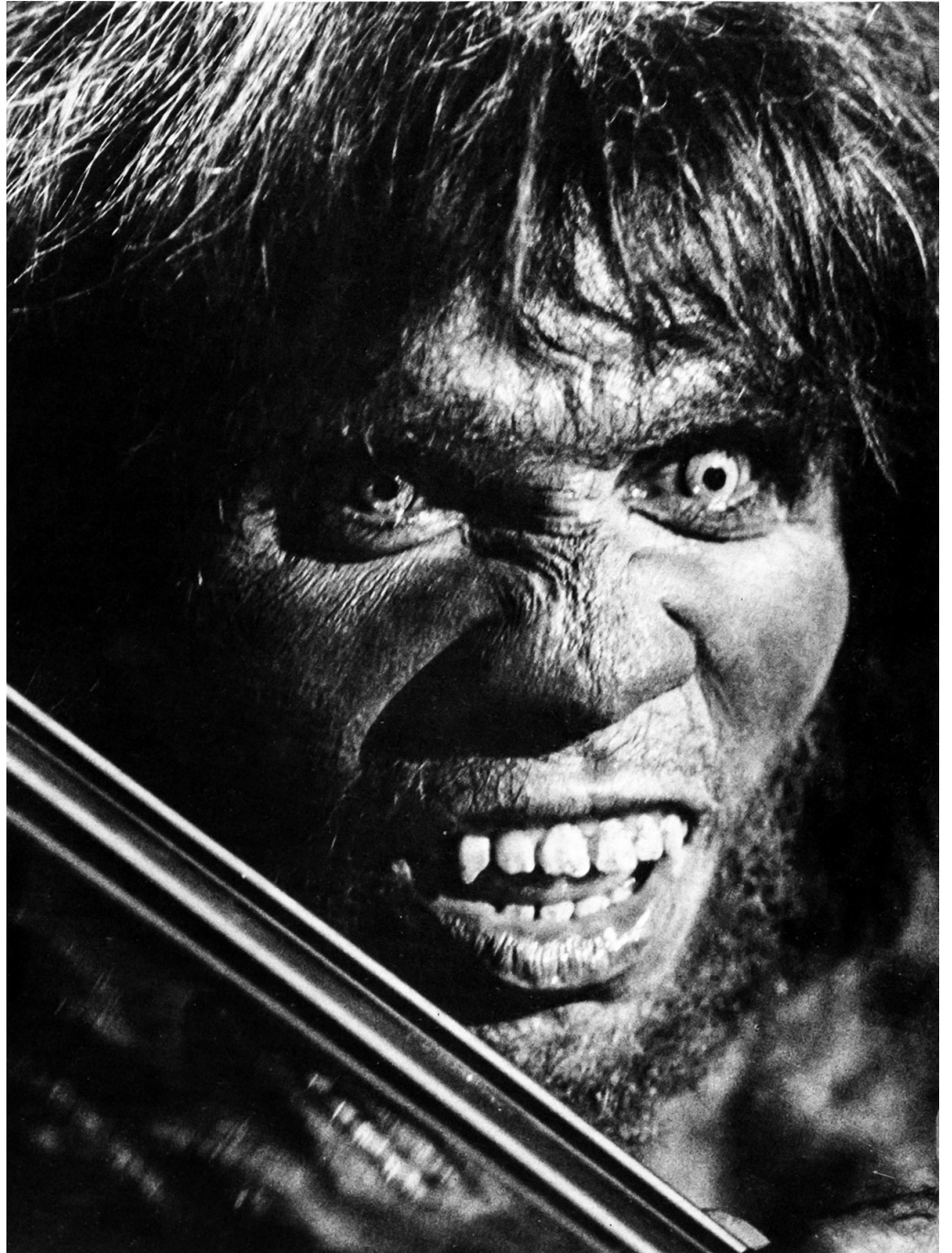
skin tones very closely. Skin colorings are very broken-up and uneven. You have to duplicate that, like in the surrounding skin, or else an appliance—with its heavier makeup—can easily look like wax or plastic.”

A further complication is the difference between what the human eye sees and what film emulsions record. Rubber reflects light differently than flesh, and while a viewer’s eye will compensate for this, the camera tends to ‘read’ the rubber as being more grey. Tilting towards the red-orange part of the spectrum will correct this on the typical appliance makeup. As the makeup is quite greasy on the rubber, it must be ‘set’ to achieve a flesh-like sheen without actually being shiny. Baker uses Johnson’s baby powder—sometimes cut with another, translucent powder—applied in several coats. This absorbs the excess oil, while taking on the coloration of the makeup.

The advent of modern surgical adhesives has made life much easier for both actor and makeup artist, replacing the foul-smelling spirit gum, which was difficult to remove, caused allergic reactions and could crystallize under the appliance. Nevertheless, application of appliances is still tedious, exacting work, requiring considerable experience. The subject must remain still as the appliance’s blending edge is merged imperceptibly into the adjacent skin. The edge can buckle easily, and is destroyed upon removal—the reason appliances are used once and thrown away.

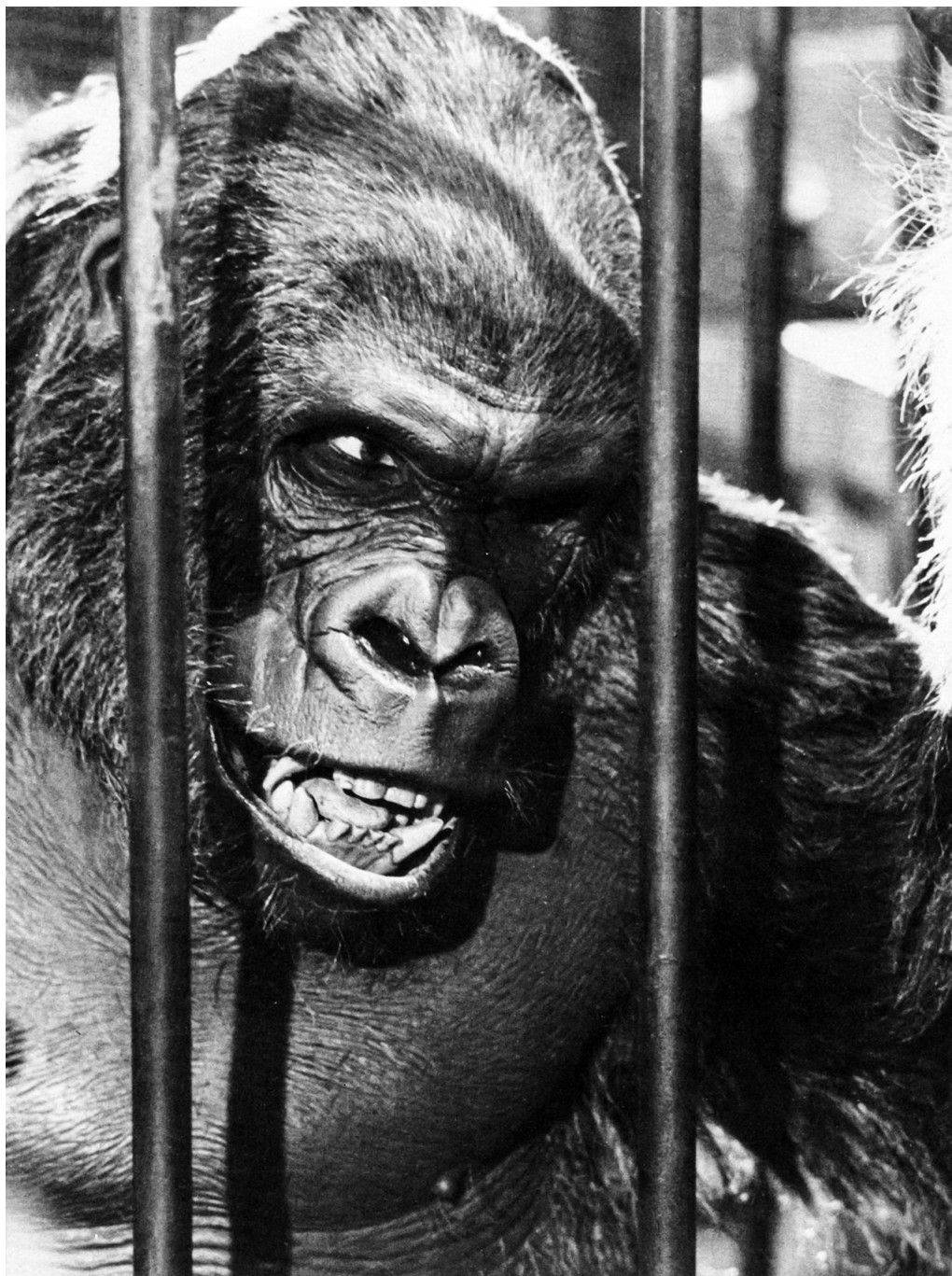
“*Mission Impossible* did a lot to misinform people about makeup,” Baker comments. “First of all, a likeness makeup would be limited to someone with a very similar head shape and bone structure. I haven’t seen one yet that could fool me in person. Even though you’d do it much differently than for film—much more subtly—real skin and real features can’t be duplicated that easily. But you *could* fool people under the right conditions. If you’re not looking directly at someone for half an hour, from three feet away under bright lights, he could get away with it.” Some years ago, Baker received an odd offer to try his hand at just such a proposition. Two men contacted him with a story that they needed new appearances for a party they were to attend. The cost, *in cash*, was no object. Already feeling suspicious, Baker went to the address given, and found a boarded-up house with an overgrown lawn and only a sofa and TV set for interior furnishing. He explained the necessary procedures to the duo, from lifemask on. But his would-be employers balked at the idea of their *real* features being recorded in plaster, and asked if the molds could be destroyed immediately after use. “It just got real obvious to me that they were up to something. I was still considering the job for the sheer challenge of pulling it off, but then I thought: ‘Hey, what if these guys are killers? I don’t want to become an accessory.’ But even scarier: ‘How do I turn them down now? Maybe I know too much already.’ I was freaking out while trying to appear calm. So I

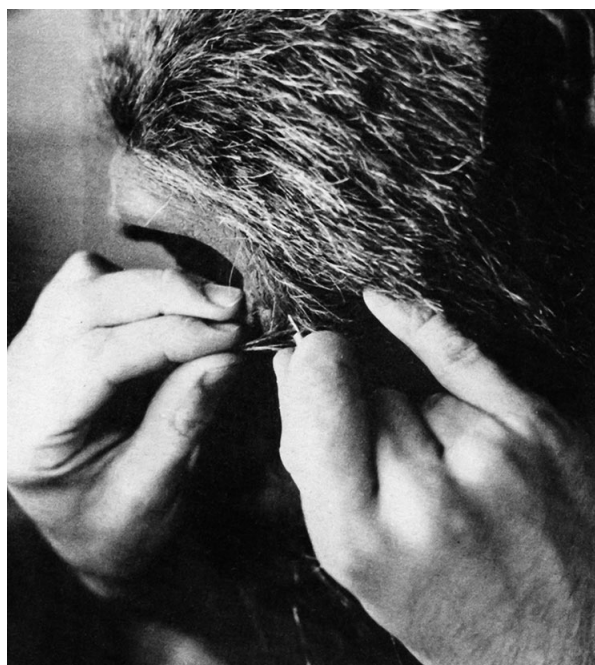
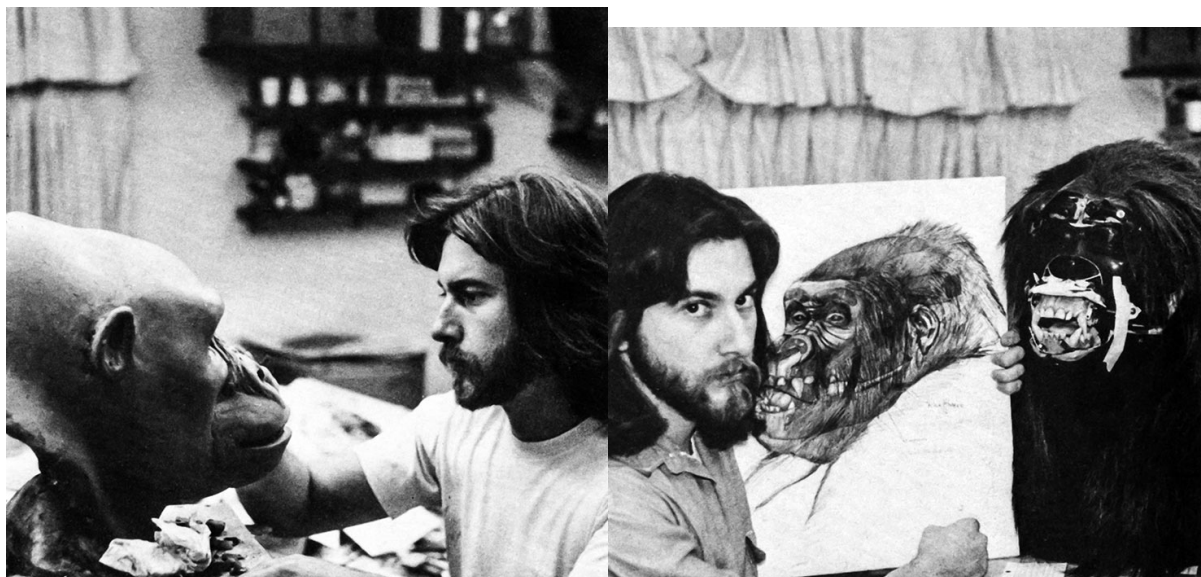
Working lifemasks: four pro deteriora actor Ale astronau from Sat inexplica causes h dissolve, Melting ! applying makeup photogra masks w globs of Melting !



CINEFEX 1







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Naturally, both artists wanted to do as much of the final Kong design as possible. This translated into another competition, this time over the look of Kong's head. In a 'blind judging' of the two sculptures, Baker again won out, but several modifications were requested. Though also successful in gaining acceptance of his moldmaking procedures and choice of materials for the head, on virtually every other design idea for making a better ape, Baker ran into an implacable stone wall.

Baker set up shop at the old M-G-M makeup department facilities, together with twenty mostly-apprentice moldmakers and sculptors already on the picture. But his lack of union status prevented his getting started, so the front office secured a sculptor's card for him and promised to work on the rest. "To do all the work I needed to do on *Kong*, I would've had to have belonged to five different unions to keep everyone happy. I think the idea behind unions is great—they just don't always work out so well in practice when you're dealing with creative people. They file you in little pigeonholes. What happens in an area like makeup, where you can have one person who does many different things well—and *needs* to do them in order to maintain quality control?"

He could now sculpt, but the molds from what he sculpted would have to be made by others, on his instructions. The rest remained up in the air. Simultaneously hoping to prevent trouble down the line, and to gain the official sanction the producers had promised, Baker had the makeup union representative come by to appraise the situation. On a raft of technicalities, Baker was given a special exemption, thus begging the essential question. Whether a 'monster' suit is officially classified as 'makeup' is a controversy that rages to this day.

Perhaps the most flagrant example of union red tape was to occur later on, when Baker received a dressing room/makeup trailer, but found it had no power. All that was required to solve the problem was to insert one plug into a wall socket. But with no one from the electricians union present on the stage, hours slipped away waiting for someone with proper jurisdiction. The 'major leagues' of filmmaking, thought Baker, were a curious contrast to the independent brand he'd come up on, where a family atmosphere prevailed and everyone could pitch in freely for the film's benefit.

One result of the prototype screen test—and an earlier demonstration with the modified *Thing with Two Heads* suit

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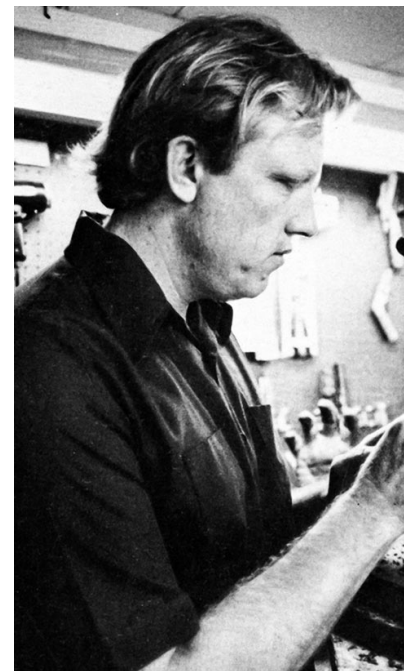
Baker set up shop at the old M-G-M makeup department facilities, together with twenty mostly-apprentice moldmakers and sculptors already on the picture. But his lack of union status prevented his getting started, so the front office secured a sculptor's card for him and promised to work on the rest. "To do all the work I needed to do on *Kong*, I would've had to have belonged to five different unions to keep everyone happy. I think the idea behind unions is great—they just don't always work out so well in practice when you're dealing with creative people. They file you in little pigeonholes. What happens in an area like makeup, where you can have one person who does many

Kong was custom-made to fit Baker, but not fully in accordance with what he knew would look good and work well. He'd originally wanted to cast individual parts of the suit, both for additional detail and for convenient replacement as they deteriorated. When this was vetoed, he thought that instead of sculpting individual muscle groups for separate molds, the whole torso could be sculpted and muscle sections cut out of whole-torso castings. These would be harder to match, but would still preserve some of the advantages of separate parts, specially made. But Rambaldi ended up fabricating most of the shoulders and back out of sheet polyfoam. The suit's padding was similarly built up, in an attempt to match the body sculpture that had been done over a full-body cast of Baker. A rib cage form taken directly from the sculpture was cast in a harder polyurethane foam and partly covered with foam latex.

The painstaking process of hand-ventilation—calling for hair shafts to be individually tied by hand into the suit fabric—was, and remains, the best method for making a suit of this kind. When this procedure was rejected, however, Baker suggested that a special order be placed with a textile mill for a high-quality fake fur, in sufficient quantity to also accommodate the giant mechanical Kong the producers insisted upon building. Instead, black bearhides were procured from a Hollywood taxidermist, over Baker's objections that—besides having the wrong texture, color and hair-growth pattern—the hides would be hot, heavy and inflexible. The nine different hides it took to cover one suit could not possibly match; and once placed over the suit padding, the hair stood straight up as Baker had predicted. Rambaldi then had the hair cut short, which Baker felt looked worse than the worst fake fur you could buy.

Certain that the suit would have to be Kong for the entire film, Baker had sculpted a series of heads, to cover the full range of Kong's expressions. "In the storyboards, the forty-foot robot did everything. I kept telling them, 'People have been trying to build robots that work since forever. You're not going to make that thing walk around, bend over and pick up a person. It'll bend over and it'll fall over!' But they didn't want to hear that."

Five Kong heads in all were derived from Baker's sculptures, and made to his specifications in every respect except the controlling mechanisms. Baker had preferred the freedom of self-contained mechanisms—like those he had employed for his initial test suit—but Rambaldi was much more accustomed to working with push-pull cable systems. As employed, each articulated head could be moved by its cable mechanics over a certain range of expression. The 'generic' Kong head began in a neutral state, with its eleven cables, routed from inside the

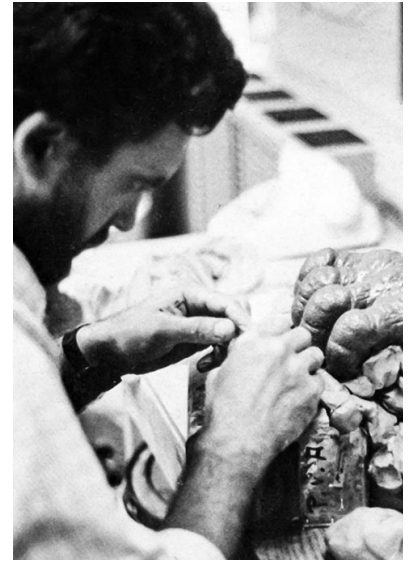


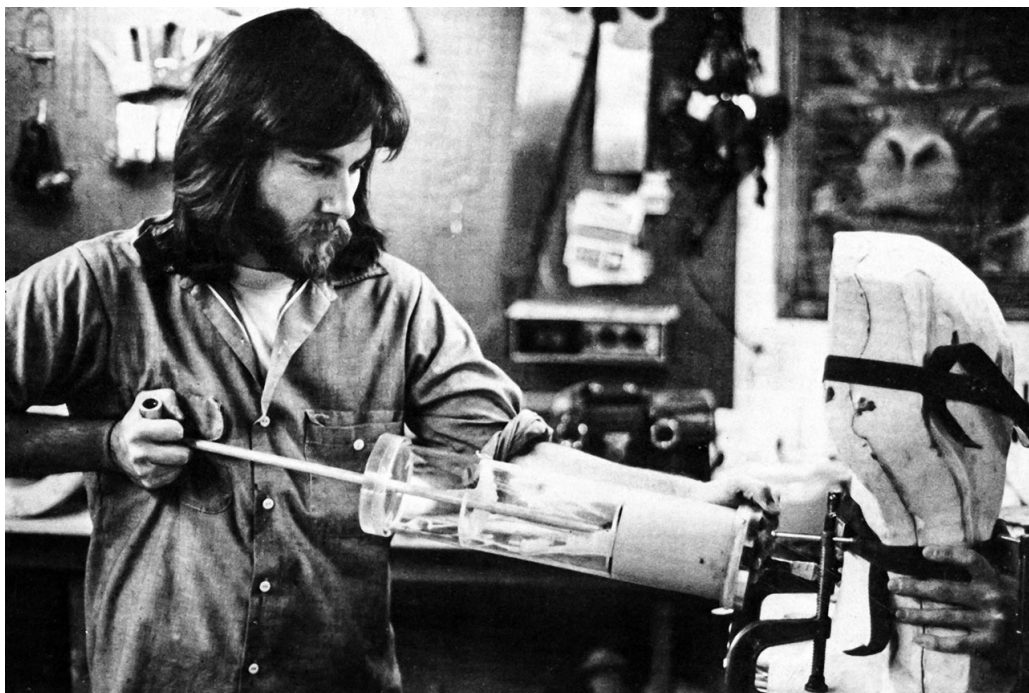
Sculptor Mike McCracken rendering an ape hand in clay. / The hand — fashioned in oil-based clay — is placed on a wooden support while Steve Spencer lays up a dam of water-based clay around it. / Next, the clay is smoothed out and rubber domes, or keys, are inserted to insure proper registration. / A splash coat of plaster is then applied to cover the sculpture and fill in all crevices and air pockets. / A finishing coat of plaster — reinforced with sisal fibers — is applied and allowed to harden. Once it has, the plaster is removed, resulting in a perfect half-mold. The clay hand is then inverted and the process repeated to record the other half. / Once completed, the two halves are joined around a plaster core — representing the area

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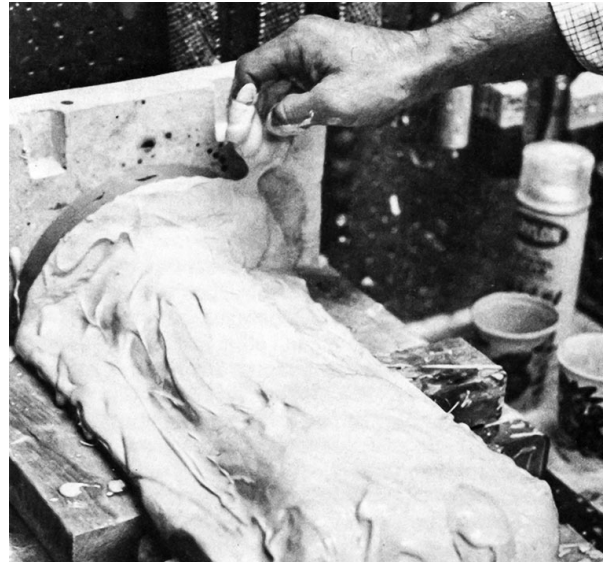
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*Sculptor Mike McCracken
rendering an ape hand in
clay. / The hand —
fashioned in oil-based clay —*





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head' was also available, for shots where a foot cables—which added weight to the suit, the risk of tripping up Baker or yanking it was not practical or required.

"The closeups got a lot of emotion out of a lot of the credit goes to Carlo's mechanical suit, but that suit was a joke. It was embarrassing, definitely a suit you could not see in person. The zippers, the sleeves, all the joints show. You can do wrong with an ape suit as right as any good on film, either, but [cinematographer] Carlo did an amazing job of disguising the major faults."

Being inside this type of suit is an experience. It's like being imprisoned in a wetsuit several feet underwater. It's hot, it's sweaty, it's uncomfortable. The concern was a constant concern; the suit was a duplicate gorilla eyes ranged from painful to uncomfortable; minimal clearance inside the helmet, the fiberglass underskull, but also moving the contact with the wearer's face. "You have to work in something like that. The only way it is that you get into the role so much for a while."

A backup Kong suit was made—and worn by Sheppard in a few scenes—but Baker endured months of production and ninety percent of the screen. While in the suit, he braved explosions, heights and generally lax safety. His dedication to the film. In the end, the public had all been the giant hydraulic Kong, his appearance and glimpsed for but a few seconds.

"My mind tries to repress the memories of the year he spent on a revenge of sorts via his next ape-out satirical revue *Kentucky Fried Movie*. In the film, named 'Dino' breaks away from his training newsroom set after being insulted by the gorilla, essentially a continuation of the suit Baker wore when *Kong* came along. The construction was a compromise because it had to be sandwiched between the gorilla suit and the actor's body; but despite fake fur and other details, Baker feels this suit was much more comfortable, at least in appearance. "It was a lot closer to the real thing. Even under that harsh, flat video light, you could see where the head and arms join on." A few years after *Kentucky Fried Movie*, Baker



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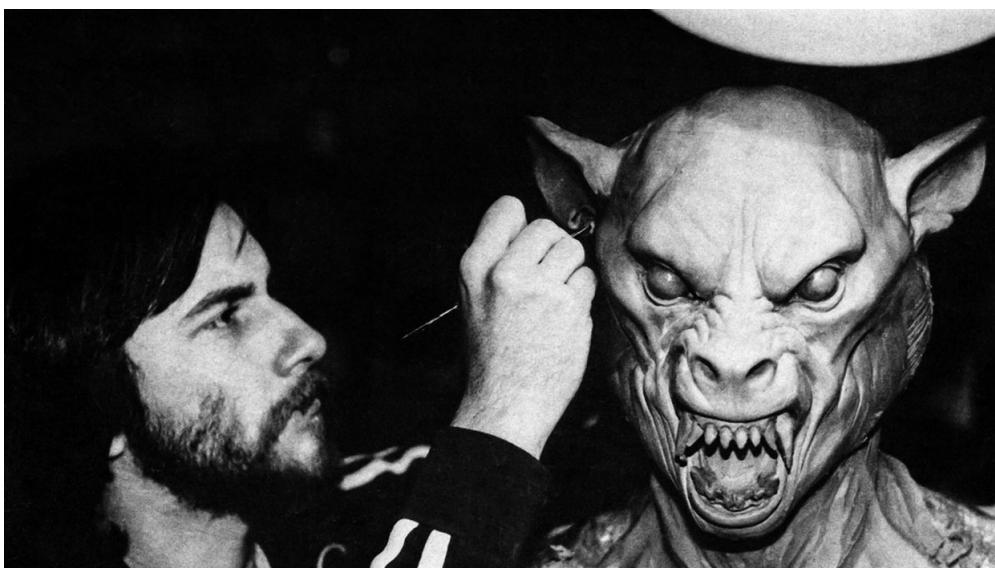
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CINEFEX





have six inches of clay at the muzzle, the de cast in this mold, will have a quarter-inch except at blending edges, such as around

Unlike a 'human' foam appliance, a gorilla uniform shading. It must also survive stretching, which rules out most painting n paint is used, composed of pigment, rubber to liquefy the rubber cement. (As with m: employed in professional makeup work, be ic and volatile, making good ventilation an imperative.) There is no exact formula. Ba dients by sight and experience. Too much the paint to stick to itself; with too little won't stick at all, but too much will attac Airbrushed or painted on, the paint will sl along with the latex skin instead of crac

Hair is carefully 'punched' through the la la head one strand at a time, by hand. To a sewing needle with the eye cut off at an an groove. This takes a hair through the rubb on the outside and a doubled-up loop of hai loop is sealed in place with a bead of liquic it back from the inside surface of the rul flexibility and the appearance that the ha ing outward.

With a completed gorilla face in hand, ti now be translated into fiberglass to form a the gorilla face will fit precisely. By the s: to duplicate a lifemask, a silicone-rubber made. In this flexible mold, the fiberglass— fiber-impregnated cloth and a laminating it hardens, the result is a thin fiberglass c having great strength and rigidity for its

This underskull is a framework. The jaw hinged, with allowance for the subsequen areas must be cut out where any movea eyebrows—need to go, and provision m mechanics. The 'face' part of the undersk just before the ears. With the attachment cap, the underskull looks and wears som helmet. It is not an exact fit on the wearer cept at the contact area around the eyes. Bal the spatial relationships and areas of dive: by placing the wearer's lifemask into the cla taking note of which parts of the undersku down and which building up. When the fit i is buffed to a smooth finish.

"You need to be aware, back when you're how your mechanics are going to work,"



CINEFEX 1

